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AUTHOR Schmidt, Patricia Ruggiano
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ABSTRACT

An ethnographic study observed a kindergarten classroom community, as "Peley" (of Southeast Asian origin) and "Raji" (of Indian origin) interacted with students and staff to develop their English literacy. Data included field notes collected at home and at the suburban, central New York elementary school. In-depth interviews with parents, educators, and the two children were conducted. Results indicated that: (1) the children struggled with their social interactions; (2) the children were often visibly confused during holiday festivities and classroom celebrations; (3) home-school communication was inadequate; and (4) the teacher struggled to understand the children but was unaware of the children's home cultures. Findings suggest that early childhood classrooms should adopt the additive or diversity perspective rather than focus on assimilation or cultural blending. (Twenty-six references are attached.) (RS)

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Patricia Ruggiano Schmidt
Reading and Language Arts Center
173 Huntington Hall
Syracuse University
Syracuse, NY 13244-2340
phone (315) 443-4755

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Running head: LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

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Literacy Development of Two Bilingual, Ethnic-minority Children in a kindergarten Program

Peley and Raji (psuedonyms), the children who provided the focus of this study were of Southeast Asian and Indian origins attending a suburban, Central New York, elementary school. They were born in the United States and exposed to at least two languages since birth. Both children were required to function in two cultures, the home culture and school culture and use their languages appropriately. Mrs. Starr (pseudonym), the children's tenured teacher, with five years of experience, expressed her thoughts about Peley and Raji during the first month of school:

> I'm worried about Peley and Raji. They're not making friends. They seem to be bright children, but they rarely speak up in class discussions. Raji stands back and observes most class activities, while Peley criticizes any student near her. I'm worried about their learning in this program.

Mrs. Starr's kindergarten program emphasized social interactions for literacy learning through mini-lessons and small group activities. She believed literacy was not simply reading and writing, but the meaning making which comes from successful social interactions within the classroom. She considered literacy a social process related to community building (Bloome & Green, 1982).

Therefore, Mrs. Starr's concerns about Peley and Raji seemed relevant. The purpose of my ethnographic study was to observe the kindergarten classroom community as Peley and Raji interacted with students and staff to develop their English literacy.

Previous Research

It has been suggested that children who represent bilingual, ethnic-minority groups have great difficulty fitting into the context of American classrooms (Au & Mason, 1981; Hakuta, 1986; Trueba, Jacobs & Kirton, 1990). Their struggles are believed to occur because they must function within at least two cultures as they develop their literacies (Cummins, 1986). Recently, sociocultural studies which focus on home and school connections for literacy learning address the struggles of bilingual, ethnic minority children (Cummins, 1980; Fishman, 1984; Reyhner & Garcia, 1989; Moll, 1990; Snow, 1992). However, these studies do not focus on the early childhood school years when program emphasis is on literacy learning (Spodek, 1983; Teale & Martinez, 1989).

Peley and Raji struggled during their year in kindergarten as they developed their English literacy. Similar to the African-American children in Rist's, The Invisible Children (1978), Peley and Raji struggled in the dominant classroom culture. Similar to the teacher in

Kidder's, Among Schoolchildren (1989), Mrs. Starr struggled to understand the children's literacy development. This ethnographic study contributes to the understanding of the children's struggles as they developed their English literacy in Mrs. Starr's kindergarten program and adds to the research reflecting the sociocultural perspective.

Methodology

Theoretical Framework and Data Collection

Symbolic interactionism served as the theoretical framework based on the premise that the way people act depends on their interpretation of a situation and the meaning they give it (Blumer, 1969). During a year of frequent participant observation, "data were collected systematically and unobtrusively in the form of field notes" (Bogdan, 1972) at school and at home. In-depth interviews of parents, educators and the two children were included, as well as documents, such as student work, report cards, testing information and classroom materials.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was ongoing and continuous from the beginning of data collection, using the constant comparative methodology (Glaser, 1978). Data were read and reread for preliminary themes used in the analysis. As more data were considered, themes were refined to form the final coding categories. Recurring patterns offered explanations for

these children's experiences which were grounded in the evidence (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) of their classroom world.

Results of the study demonstrated struggles during classroom work and play settings, formal literacy learning sessions, holidays and celebrations, and home-school communications.

Results

Work and Play in Learning Centers.

Children in this kindergarten worked and played in assigned learning centers consisting of five students whose membership changed to facilitate class social interactions . At each center group tasks reflected the weekly theme of nursery rhyme or letter of the alphabet. Peley and Raji experienced problems with social interactions in most centers. The following scenes, enacted at the block center, demonstrated their struggles:

Large and small blocks were used to build a structure for the weekly theme. Step by step directions were written on sheets of construction paper and posted on the side shelf of the center. A teaching assistant would read and explain the instructions. As Peley worked, she would yell the letter or shape. "This is a "Z"! See it!" She would also attempt to talk to the children in the group, "I saw you on the bus, Brian. Do you know me?" Brian would shake his head in the positive. Peley would persist, "Do you want to

play peek?" She would then duck behind a wall of blocks and make loud sounds, "Yuck! Yuck! Heee! Heee!" Jennifer, in an exasperated voice, would respond , "Peley, don't do that! It hurts my ears!" Often the children would ignore Peley's antics; they would be absorbed in their own building. Peley would then complain of a pain. "My leg hurts! OOooh! My leg hurts. I don't feel good! I hurt!" Mrs. Starr would arrive on the scene and ask Peley if she'd like to go to the nurse. Peley would reply in the negative, with an emphatic shake of the head and continue watching the children build.

When Raji entered the block center, he would head for the big blocks, carry one under each arm and softly say, "Look, I am strong! I am a strong man." No one in the group would comment. He would begin building his own structure and then attempt to join the group by adding a block to their building. The group rebuff would be immediate. "Don't put it there. It doesn't belong!" or "That's a road, not a door!" or "Put your blocks away!" Raji would return to his own building.

Raji and Peley were involved in similar scenes in all centers throughout the school year.

Friends.

During December, Peley became friendly with Annie, a child who cried and laughed easily. When given an opportunity to choose someone to work or play with in

centers, Peley began selecting Annie. "Will you be my friend? I want to sit with you. I will call you on the phone. Give me your numbers." Peley tried calling Annie, but copied the nine as a six and was unable to reach Annie by phone. By January, Mrs. Starr placed Peley and Annie in learning centers together. However, the relationship soured when Annie was invited to a classmate's birthday party and Peley was not. Upon discovery, Peley could not be comforted. With tears and anger, she screamed, "Jeanie took my friend from me! She took my friend!" For the rest of the morning, Peley sat with frowning face and arms folded against her chest. She refused to do her work and told Mrs. Starr, "I'm sick!"

Peley spent most of the rest of the year either alone, or paired with someone the teacher suggested.

As the school year ended, Raji would sit next to Peley or Jerry. Raji wrote Peley's name in his Kindergarten Yearbook as his school helper. He also stated, "Jerry is my friend. He doesn't say mean things to me."

During most of the year, neither Peley nor Raji seemed able to gain entry into a group while the other children in the class seemed to experience consistent positive social interactions.

Formal Literacy Learning

Formal literacy learning for Peley and Raji was within

the school's understanding of "normal" for this kindergarten program, but oral directions, sequence, vocabulary and idiomatic expressions were problematic for them. Also, Southeast Asian and Indian cultures were not addressed; related materials were not in the classroom.

Reading group.

Peley and Raji were placed in the top kindergarten reading group consisting of sixteen children. However, they left the group twice a week for ESL classes and were rarely present for a complete reading lesson which usually took two to three days to accomplish. Consequently, they would become confused with many workbook exercises.

Story writing.

Peley and Raji had many opportunities to write stories and experiment with invented spelling in the kindergarten writing-to-read program. In the spring, Peley began sharing stories and became the class commedienne by making fun of herself. The following is an example of her story writing:

> I can say this Me and My big mouth aint I a stinky and I can say Mom I love you varry much I love you to much that I cood screem varry loud.

The class would laugh with delight when Peley read her stories. She continued the theme of "stinker and big mouth."

Raji visited his relatives in India during December and

January. When he returned, Mrs. Starr guided his story writing at the computer station. She helped him type sentences about India. She cut his story into strips of words and taped each to a page in a stapled booklet. Raji drew magic marker pictures on the pages and shared it with the class. Mrs. Starr helped him read his story.

India

It is hot in India.

Santimz in India it is cold.

I nevr so sno in India.

After the reading, no comments or questions followed from the class. Raji seldom wrote or shared stories for the rest of the year.

According to Mrs. Starr's judgement and formal assessments, Peley met with greater success than Raji in the formal literacy program.

Holidays and Classroom Celebrations

Several holidays and classroom festivities seemed to accentuate the children's struggles to function successfully in the school culture.

For Halloween, Peley colored her face red, wore a molded plastic, blonde, princess mask and called herself "Barbie Doll." After the Thanksgiving story, her classmates drew turkeys, Pilgrims and Native Americans while she drew herself. When making Christmas gifts, her classmates

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imprinted hands in white paste for their parents while she hid behind a "big book." On her birthday, the expected treats for the class did not arrive from home. For Easter, she colored a green and red rabbit and wrote about falling leaves. Peley was often visibly confused during special school events. Raji experienced similar confusions.

After the Thanksgiving story, Raji drew fish. His classmates ridiculed, "Yuck! You eat fish for Thanksgiving? That's funny!" Raji was the only child absent for Valentine's Day and the only child not wearing green on St. Patrick's Day. On Marvelous Mother's Day, he was the only child who didn't speak for his mother. For Easter, he colored an orange rabbit and wrote about eating too many eggs.

Mrs. Starr observed the children's confusions and commented, "At times, Peley and Raji seem lost."

Home-School Communications

The kindergarten staff was proud of their communication with parents. However, Mrs. Starr struggled to communicate effectively with Peley's and Raji's families; the families struggled too.

Family communication with the school.

Family communication difficulties were manifested in their understanding of the ESL program and their children's social interactions.

Both families saw the ESL class as important to the children's literacy learning. Peley's parents knew she did not like going, but they believed it was necessary for her academic progress. Raji's parents thought ESL class was important until they discovered that Raji had been leaving the reading group to go to ESL twice a week. They believed Raji should not miss classes, but they did not question the school.

Similarly, social interactions were not addressed by the families. At the beginning of the school year, Peley's mother spoke about Peley wanting a school friend. She wondered:

> Peley want friend. How she have friend? We have custom. They have custom different. Peley don't understand. I don't know people. My English not good.

Peley's mother wanted to help Peley, but she seemed unable to communicate her concerns to the school.

When Raji returned from India, he arrived in school as a boisterous, verbal and smiling child, different from the reserved demeanor witnessed in the fall. However, within a few weeks, he withdrew to his lonely self. His parents saw the changes, but did not know how to communicate with the school.

School communication with the families.

Language in written and oral communication seemed to

hinder connections with the children's parents. Mrs. Starr did not communicate her concerns to the parents because she believed they might not understand. Mrs. Starr explained, "I just don't know how to tell them." She also had difficulty communicating with Peley's parents. She believed their English was limited; they rarely spoke to her and usually smiled and nodded whenever she spoke. They also missed many school activities or arrived hours or days late.

While other children's parents were contacted when the staff perceived problems during the school year, Peley's and Raji's parents were not. At the end of the school year, Mrs. Starr informed Raji's parents of staff concerns relating to Raji's literacy learning; she recommended the summer literacy maintenance program. Peley's parents were not notified about summer recommendations. Mrs. Starr spoke directly to Peley and encouraged her to read books and join a summer day camp.

Because the school staff did not communicate perceptions of Raji and Peley to their parents, the children's problems were not addressed.

Discussion and Implications

Literacy learning in this kindergarten program was synonymous with classroom social situations. The teacher interactions with students and the student interactions with one another affected literate actions. However, Peley

and Raji struggled with their social interactions and were often visibly confused during holiday festivities and classroom celebrations.

Sociocultural studies emphasize connecting the home and school cultures for literacy learning (Goldenberg, 1987; VerHoeven, 1987; Swain, 1988; Reyhner & Garcia 1989; Trueba, Jacobs and Kirton, 1990). Mrs. Starr struggled to understand Peley and Raji, but she was unaware of the children's home cultures. The inadequate home-school communication contributed to the children's struggles.

The Civil Rights Movement and more recently, the influx of Cambodian, Vietnamese, Haitian and Cuban refugees have caused national attention to focus on cultural diversity (Kiefer & DeStephano, 1985) rather than assimilation or cultural blending (Porter, 1990). Peley and Raji struggled in their attempts to blend into the classroom culture. Since school drop out rates for bilingual ethnic-minorities are associated with the assimilation or cultural blending perspective, (Swain, 1972; Cummins, 1980; Weber, 1990) this study implies that early childhood classrooms should adopt the additive (Cummins, 1986) or diversity perspective. In doing so, teacher's must become aware of the means to ennance the literacy development of bilingual, ethnic-minority students, the fastest growing school population (Garcia, 1986, Trueba, Jacobs & Kirton, 1990).

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